

What is a Thesis Statement?

“The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.”
~Anaïs Nin

All papers require a clear introduction that tells the reader what to expect from the paper. However, the persuasive or argumentative paper explicitly states the thesis—what the author is going to prove to the reader. The thesis statement is one or two sentences at most, and it usually appears at the end of the introduction. Because the statement must be both compact and clear, writing it can be quite difficult.

How do I write a thesis statement?

Developing a thesis statement is as much of a process as writing the entire paper; in fact, the two processes are inseparable. Therefore, while some instructors will ask students to submit a thesis statement before writing the rest of the paper, remember that this is only a working thesis statement. It is rather like a hypothesis in a science project. As authors write their outlines and drafts, their thesis statements change; the focus will narrow, the focus might change to a different area of the subject, or the opinion of the original topic changes during the writing process. This is okay, as authors actually write their final thesis statement during the last draft of the paper.

Before you even begin to consider your thesis statement, you must first determine the type of paper you are writing. Is it analytical, expository, argumentative, or narrative?

- ◎ An **analytical** paper breaks down an issue or an idea into its component parts, evaluates the issue or idea, and presents this breakdown and evaluation to the audience. The following is an example of an **analytical thesis statement**: *An analysis of our nation's current education system suggests one challenge for building administrators: providing ineffective teachers with additional professional development or removing ineffective teachers from their classroom responsibilities.* The paper that follows should explain the challenge building administrators face **AND** the analysis of providing ineffective teachers with additional professional development versus removing ineffective teachers from their classroom responsibilities.
- ◎ An **expository** (explanatory) paper explains something to the audience. The following is an example of **expository (explanatory) thesis statement**: *The characteristics of life for an adult returning to college includes working full-time, spending quality time with family, studying, and attending class.* The paper that follows should explain how adult students spend their time working, managing family responsibilities, studying, and attending class.
- ◎ An **argumentative** paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided. The following is an example of an **argumentative thesis statement**: *Schools should be organized kindergarten through eighth grade before high school in order to allow students to develop maturity and to provide a continuity of care.* The paper that follows should present an argument and give evidence to support the claim that schools should be organized kindergarten through eighth grade before high school. The evidence and support should be focused on developmental maturity of middle school students in particular and on the benefits of continuity of care.

If you are writing a text that does not fall under these three categories (ex. a narrative), a thesis statement somewhere in the first paragraph could still be helpful to your reader.

A good thesis statement has the following features:

- It is debatable
- It is specific
- It tells readers something they do not already know
- It can be proven

1. **Make It Debatable**—Beginning authors often try for the opposite. They want to write papers that everyone will agree with so that they will feel more secure. However, such papers turn out to be boring, because they do not challenge either the reader or the writer. Debatable does not necessarily mean that the thesis stirs strong emotions, although it can. Nonetheless, it is important that authors consistently create thesis statements with which a reasonable person **could** disagree.

All of the following topics **are debatable**. Notice how an opposing statement (italics) follows each topic.

- In developing nations, the Peace Corps has improved the image of the "ugly American."
However, anti-American sentiment is on the rise; Peace Corps volunteers have behaved badly in some cases.
- Affirmative action remains essential to create equal educational opportunities. *Many have argued that the policy is no longer necessary or effective. As a result, "reverse discrimination" is now a problem.*
- Improved corporation communication with customers is a direct result of the internet.
Corporation employees now spend less time face-to-face with their clients, email messages are not read, and the internet intimidates some clients.

The following examples **are not sufficiently debatable**; therefore, they make poor thesis statements.

- Boxing is violent.
- Some people love art, while others do not.
- The ghost in *Beloved* plays a significant role.
- The bombing of London in World War II caused tremendous damage.

2. **Be Specific**—The non-debatable examples are also very general. The difficulty in arguing against something becomes more so when the author cannot even define the terms of the argument. Any of the non-debatable statements become debatable, or workable, when the author questions each part of the statement. For example:

- Some people love abstract art, while others do not. *Who loves it? Why? How is love defined? What kind of abstract art? Who are these others? What are their objections? Are those objections valid?*

After answering these questions, the author's workable thesis statement might look like this:

- While the artist Francis Bacon once dismissed Jackson Pollock's paintings as pieces of "lace," they are anything but simple decoration. Pollock's 1948 "Composition," for example, shows how the texture of paint can be more meaningful than shape and structure.

Specifying terms also helps authors narrow the scope of their argument, so they can sufficiently cover the subject in the number of pages allowed. Some narrowing should naturally occur during the outlining and writing of the drafts; however, starting with an extremely general topic, such as "Racism is harmful," makes the beginning of writing difficult. Such a general topic provides little to no guidance for the writer or the reader.

3. **Tell Us Something We Do Not Know**—Authors need to do more than to make their thesis debatable. They must also tell readers something they did not know before. This helps motivate readers to explore and to read the author's work. However, an author does not need to uncover the origins of the universe to make a worthwhile contribution to the reader's knowledge.

As with any type of writing, consider the scope of the paper. For a five to seven page English paper, for example, it would be enough to show how examining a certain event in a short story can help the reader better understand one of its major themes. An author might choose a side in an argumentative debate. Being either "pro" or "con" would not be a new position, but the author could take the position for new reasons. This approach forces the author to narrow the topic to a manageable size. In well-covered territory, new reasons include subtle reasons, which an author discovers by studying specific instances. The thesis statement should explicitly answer the question, "Why should we care?"

4. **Can You Prove It?**—The other side of finding a new and debatable thesis is that the author still must be able to prove it. While making outrageous claims in the thesis statement, such as the Earth is flat, will certainly catch the reader's attention and spark debate, it will also leave the author stuck. In addition, avoid arguments about trivial points that either cannot or do not need to be proven, such as reporting that a newspaper article on a recent storm is poorly punctuated.

Finally, a few important things to remember:

- The thesis statement usually appears near the beginning of a paper. It can be the first sentence of an essay, but that often feels like a simplistic, unexciting beginning. **It more frequently appears at or near the end of the first paragraph or two.** This is the preferred placement for most instructors.
- The first paragraph serves as kind of a funnel opening to the essay, which draws and invites readers into the discussion, which is then focused by the thesis statement before the work of the essay actually begins.
- Avoid announcing the thesis statement as if it were a thesis statement. In other words, **avoid using phrases such as "The purpose of this paper is . . . " or "In this paper, I will attempt to . . ."** Such phrases betray this paper to be the work of an amateur. If necessary, write the thesis statement that way the first time; it might help you determine, in fact, that this *is* your thesis statement. However, when you rewrite your paper, eliminate the bald assertion that this is your thesis statement, and write the statement itself without that annoying, unnecessary preface.